



Homily on the Myrrhbearing Women

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Printed in the United States of America

which is, so to speak, exactly what piety is? Brethren, what does it profit a man to say that he has divine faith if he does not have deeds analagous to the faith? What did the lamps profit the foolish maidens when they had no oil, in other words, the deeds of love and of compassion? What did it profit that rich man who, when he was burning in the unquenchable flame because of his indifference to Lazarus, invoked the father of Abraham? What did it profit a man to accept an invitation to the divine wedding and that incorruptible bridal chamber when he did not have a suitable garment of good deeds? Of course, in so much as he believed anyway, he received an invitation and went to sit amongst those holy ones who were at the banquet. But he also received the examination and was ashamed because he was clothed in the wickedness of his attitude and works, through which his hands and feet were tied and he was lowered to Gehenna where wailing and gnashing of teeth reverberates. May no one who has the name of Christ experience [such a thing]. Rather let us all manifest a life analagous with the faith and enter the bridal chamber of unstained joy and eternal life with the saints, which is the resting place of all who perceive the true joy.

*Translated by Protodeacon Photios Touloumes
Feast of the Holy Annunciation, 1976
Brooklyn, New York*



Homily of St. Gregory Palamas for the Sunday of the Myrrhbearing Women*

(Gospel of Saint Mark 15:43-16:8)



THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD is the regeneration of human nature. It is the resuscitation and re-creation of the first Adam, whom sin led to death, and who because of death, again was made to retrace his steps on the earth from which he was made. The resurrection is the return to immortal life. Whereas no one saw that first man when he was created and given life—because no man existed yet at that time—woman was the first person to see him after he had received the breath of life by divine inbreathing. For after him, Eve was the first human being. Likewise no one saw the second Adam, who is the Lord, rise from the dead, for none of his followers were nearby and the soldiers guarding the tomb were so shaken that they were like dead men. Following the resurrection, however, it was a woman who saw Him first before the others, as we have heard from Saint Mark's Gospel today.

*After his resurrection Jesus appeared on the morning
of the Lord's Day (Sunday) to Mary Magdalene first.*

It seems that the Evangelist is speaking clearly about the time of the Lord's resurrection—that it was morning—that he appeared to Mary Magdalene, and that he appeared to her at the time of the resurrection. But, if we pay some attention it will become clear that this is not what he says. Earlier in this passage, in agreement with the other Evangelists, Saint Mark says that Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb earlier with the other Myrrhbearing women, and that she went away when she saw it empty. Therefore, the Lord had risen much earlier on the morning on which she saw him. But wishing to fix the time more exactly, he doesn't say simply "morning," as is the case here, but "very early in the morning." Thus the expression "and the rising of the sun" as used there refers to that time when the slightest light precedes from the east on the horizon. This is what Saint John also wants to indicate when he says that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb in the morning while it was dark and saw the stone pulled away from it.

*MIGNE P.G. vol 151, pp 236-248

According to Saint John, she did not come to the tomb alone, even though she left the tomb without yet having seen the Lord. For she ran to Peter and John, and instead of announcing to them that the Lord was risen, told them that he had been taken from the tomb. Therefore, she did not yet know about the resurrection. It is not Mary Magdalene's claim that Christ appeared to her first but that He appeared after the actual beginning of the day. There is, of course, a certain shadow covering this matter on the part of the Evangelists that shall, through your love, uncover. The good news of the resurrection of Christ was received from the Lord first, before all others, by the Theotokos. This is truly meet and right. She was the first to see him after the resurrection and she had the joy of hearing His voice first. Moreover, she not only saw Him with her eyes and heard Him with her ears but with her hands she was the first and only one to touch His spotless feet, even if the Evangelists do not mention these things clearly. They do not want to present the mother's witness so as not to give the nonbelievers a reason to be suspicious. Since now my words about the joy of the risen one are directed to believers, the opportunity of this feast moves us to explain what is relative to the Myrrhbearers. Justification is given by him who said:

There is nothing hidden that shall not be made known.

And this also will be made known.

The Myrrhbearers are all those women who followed with the mother of the Lord, stayed with her during those hours of the salvific passion, and with pathos anointed Him with myrrh. After Joseph and Nicodemus asked for and received the body of the Lord from Pilate, they took it down from the cross, wrapped it in a cloth with strong spices, placed it in a carved out tomb, and closed the door of the tomb with a large stone. The Myrrhbearers were close by and watched, and as the Evangelist Mark relates, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were seated opposite the grave. With the expression "and the other Mary" he means the mother of Christ without a doubt. She was also called the mother of Iakovos (James) and Joses, who were the children of Joseph, her betrothed. It was not only they who were watching the entombment of the Lord but also the other women. As Saint Luke relates:

And the women, also, who had come with Him from Galilee, fol-

who came to the grave first and she was the first to receive the Good News of the resurrection. Many women then gathered and they also saw the stone rolled back and heard the angels, but they were separated on their return. As Saint Mark says, since they were afraid, some of the women left the tomb in a frightened and ecstatic state without saying anything to anyone. Other women followed the Mother of the Lord and because they happened to be with her they saw and heard the Lord. Mary Magdalene left to go to Peter and John, and was returning with them to the grave. And even though they left, she stayed and she also was made worthy to see the Lord and to be sent by Him to the apostles. Thus, as Saint John says, she again comes to them shouting to all that she had seen the Lord and that He had told her these things.

And Saint Mark says that this appearance happened in the morning, the indisputable beginning of the day, when the dawn had passed. But he does not contend that the resurrection of the Lord occurred at that time, nor that it was His first appearance. Therefore, we have information concerning the Myrrhbearers that is exact and the general agreement of the four Evangelists as a higher confirmation. But even with all that they had heard on the same day of the resurrection from the Myrrhbearers, from Peter, and even from Luke and Cleopas that the Lord lives and that they had seen Him, the disciples showed disbelief. That is why He castigates them when He appeared to all of them gathered together. When, however, He showed them many times through the witness of many that He was alive, not only did they all believe but they preached it everywhere.

Their voice poured out on all the earth and their words spread to the ends of the earth; and the Lord worked with them and confirmed His word by signs that accompanied it.

For until the teaching was preached to all the earth, the signs were indispensable. Exceptional signs were needed to represent and certify the truth of the message. But excellent signs are not needed for those who accept the word through firm belief. Who are these (who have firm belief)? They are those whose deeds bear witness (to their faith). "Show me your faith in your deeds," he says. "Who is faithful? Let him manifest it with the deeds of his good life." For who will believe that he who commits wicked acts and is oriented to the earth and material things has a true, exalted, great, and heavenly understanding

disciples, as Saint John says. The Mother of God went back to the tomb again when she met the other women and, as Saint Matthew says, behold Jesus met them and told them to rejoice.

So you see that even before Mary Magdalene, the Mother of God saw Him who for our salvation suffered and was buried and rose again in the flesh.

And they approached, touched His feet and worshipped Him.

Just as the Theotokos alone understood the power of the angelic words—even if she heard the Good News of the resurrection together with Mary Magdalene—when she met her son and God with the other women she saw and recognized the risen one before all the other women. And falling down, she touched His feet and became His apostle to His apostles. We learn from Saint John that Mary Magdalene was not with the Mother of God when, on her return to the sepulchre, she encountered the Lord. writes:

She runs to Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved and tells them: they have taken the Lord from the tomb and we don't know where they have put him.

If she had seen and touched Him with her hands and heard Him speak, how could she say the words “they have taken Him and placed Him elsewhere, and we don't know where?” But after Peter and John ran to the grave and saw the burial clothes and returned, Saint John says that Mary Magdalene was standing near the tomb and crying.

You see that not only had she not yet seen Him but neither had she been informed of the resurrection. And when the angels that appeared asked her “why are you crying, woman,” she again answered as if she thought that He was dead. Thus when, upon turning, she saw Jesus and still did not understand, she answered His question “why do you weep” in the same manner. Not until He called her by her name and showed her that He was the same did she understand. Then, when she also fell down before Him wishing to kiss His feet, she heard Him say: “Don't touch me.” From this we understand that when He appeared previously to His mother and to the women who accompanied her, He allowed only His mother to touch His feet, even if Matthew makes this a common concession to all the women. He did not wish, for the reason we mentioned in the beginning, to suddenly present the appearance of the mother into the issue. It was the Ever Virgin Mary

lowed after, and beheld the sepulchre and how His body was laid. These women were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who were with them.

He writes that they went and bought spices and myrrh; for they did not yet clearly know that He is truly the perfume of life for those who approach Him in faith, just as He is also the odor of death for those who remain unbelievers to the end. They did not yet clearly know that the odor of His clothes, the odor of His own body, is greater than all perfumes, that His name is like myrrh that is poured out to cover the world with His divine fragrance. For those who wanted to remain close by the body, they contrived an antidote of perfumes for the stench of decomposition and anointed it.

Thus they prepared the myrrh and the spices and rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment. For they had not yet experienced the true Sabbath, nor did they understand that exceedingly blessed Sabbath that transports us from the confines of hell to the perfection of the bright and divine heights of heaven. Saint Luke says that “on the first day of the week, very early in the morning,” they came to the sepulchre bearing the spices that they had prepared. And Saint Matthew says that those who came “late on the Sabbath towards the dawn of the Lord's day” were two in number. Saint John says that it was only Mary Magdalene who came, and that it was “morning, even though it was still dark.” But Saint Mark says that three women came very early in the morning on the first day of the week. By “the first day of the week” all the Evangelists mean the Lord's Day [Sunday] and they use expressions like “late on the Sabbath,” “early dawn,” “early morning,” “morning,” and “even though it was still dark” [to refer to the Lord's Day which is Sunday]. They mean the daybreaking hour when the darkness fights with the light and the hour when the eastern part of the horizon begins to become light as it presages the day. Observing from afar, one sees the light changing colors in the east at about the ninth hour of the night, which colors remain until the fulfillment of the day three hours later. It seems that the Evangelists disagree somewhat concerning both the time of the visits and the number of women [that are involved]. This is attributable to the fact that, as we said, the Myrrhbearers were many; that they did not come to the sepulchre one time only but two and three times, and not always in the same groups; that all the visits were at dawn but not at exactly the

same hour Mary Magdalene also came by herself without the others and stayed longer. Each of the Evangelists, therefore, relates one journey of some of the women and leaves the others. Consequently, by comparing all the Evangelists—and I said this before I concluded that the Theotokos was the first who came to the grave of her son and God, together with Mary Magdalene. We are informed of this by the Evangelist Matthew who said:



Mary Magdalene and the other Mary—who was, of course, the Mother of the Lord—went to look at the sepulchre. And behold there was a great earthquake: for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door of the tomb and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightening and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards did shake and become like dead men.

The other women came after the earthquake and the flight of the guards, and found the grave open and the stone rolled back. The Virgin Mother, however, was there when the quake occurred, when the stone was rolled back, when the grave opened, and while the guards were there, even though they were completely shaken with fear. That is why the guards immediately thought of fleeing when they came to from the earthquake but the Mother of God rejoiced without fear at what she saw. I believe that the life-bearing grave opened first for her. For her and by her grace all things were revealed to us, everything that is in heaven above and on the earth below. For her sake the angel shone so brightly that, even though it was still dark; she saw by means of the bright angelic light not only the empty grave but also the burial garments carefully arrayed and in an orderly fashion, thereby witnessing in many ways to the resurrection of the one who was entombed. He was, after all, that same angel of the Annunciation, Gabriel; he watched her proceed rapidly towards the grave and immediately descended. He who in the beginning had told her “fear not, Mary, you have found grace with God,” now directs the same exhor-

tation to the Ever Virgin. He came to announce the resurrection from the dead to her who, with seedless conception, gave Him birth; to raise the stone, to reveal the empty grave and the burial garments, so that in this manner the Good News would be verified for her. He writes:

And the angel answered the women and said: fear not. Do you seek the Christ whom they crucified? He is risen. Here is the place where the Lord was placed. If you see the soldiers overcome with fear, do not be afraid. I know that you seek the Christ whom they crucified. He is risen. He is not here.

For not only can He not be held by the keys, the bars, and the seals of hell, of death and of the grave, but He is even the Lord of the immortal angels of heaven, and the only Lord of the whole world. See the place where the Lord lay. Go quickly and tell his disciples that He is risen from the dead. And they departed, he says, with fear and great joy.

At this point I am of the opinion that Mary Magdalene and the other women who had come, up to that point, were still frightened. For they did not understand the meaning of the angel’s powerful words, nor could they contain to the end the power of the light so as to see and understand with exactitude. But I think that the Mother of God made this great joy her own, since she comprehended the words of the angel. Her whole person radiated from the light, in that she was all pure and full of divine grace. She firmly appropriated all these signs and the truth, and she believed the archangel, since, of course, he formerly had shown himself to be worthy of trust for her in other matters. And why shouldn’t the Virgin understand with divine wisdom what had occurred, in that she observed the events at first hand? She saw the great earthquake and the angel descending from heaven like lightening, she saw the guards fall as dead men, the removal of the stone, the emptying of the tomb, and the great miracle of the burial garments which were kept in place by myrrh and aloes, even though they contained no body. In addition to all of these things, she saw the joyous countenance of the angel and heard his joyful message: But Mary Magdalene, in responding to the proclamation, acted as if she had not heard the angel at all—he had not in fact spoken directly to her. She testifies only to the emptying of the tomb and says nothing about the burial garments, but runs directly to Peter and to the other